



Environment and Transport Select Committee  
19 April 2012

**Highway Tree Maintenance**

**Purpose of the report:** Scrutiny of Services and Budgets

To provide an overview of highway tree maintenance activities currently being undertaken across Surrey.

**Introduction:**

- 1 Trees play a significant part of the landscape across Surrey and are considered by most people as an aesthetic enhancement to the environment. Surrey County Council has responsibility for many trees across the county however for the purpose of this report only trees that are located on or adjacent to the highway will be considered.
- 2 It is estimated that Surrey has a highway tree stock of around 2 million trees. Most highway trees have evolved themselves by self seeding, some have been planted specifically as part of a desired street scene, and others although privately owned are still of interest to the authority due to their close vicinity and impact on the public highway. Most highway trees will complete their lifecycle without problems and require minimal, if any, intervention by the authority. However it is apparent that in some locations trees have been inappropriately planted and/or outgrown their environment causing specific problems and require managed intervention.
- 3 Maintenance activities are carried out on highway trees as a necessity to manage risk and also to improve/enhance the environment. In terms of managing risk, maintenance activities include reducing risk by removing hazards such as dead, dying or diseased trees. In terms of enhancing the environment, maintenance activities encourage and support the diversity of wayside flora and fauna. On average, the Highways Service spends approximately £650,000 per annum on carrying out maintenance to highway trees.

- 4 The risk from highway trees is an important consideration when deciding maintenance regimes. Risk can be to the travelling public, private and public property, and to the highway asset itself. The risk can be a matter of health and safety to individuals and also financial cost to the authority in relation to third party claims and highway repairs.
- 5 Currently Surrey County Council maintains the highway trees across nine district and borough areas, with Woking and Epsom & Ewell having taken on responsibility for maintaining trees within their own area/locality. In line with other recent highway maintenance contract procurement, Glendale was appointed as the new contractor for tree maintenance commencing in May 2011. The new contract has provided several opportunities for improvement in the maintenance of highway trees across Surrey. These mostly include being able to carry out more work within available budgets, such as the re-introduction of lapsed maintenance programmes and also resolving more customer enquiry related work than has been possible previously.

### **Managing Risk from Highway Trees**

#### **Risk Consideration**

- 6 Highway trees can pose a variety of risks. These include falling or fallen trees, falling limbs of a tree, obstruction to passing highway users by low branches, trip hazards on footways from tree roots, and subsidence to properties. This list is not exhaustive and the level of risk will vary depending on several factors including the type and the location of the tree itself. There is the potential for serious consequences where the risk from trees is not managed efficiently. This may include personal injury, loss of life and damage to private and public property. In certain circumstances the authority may face a legal challenge however it is more common that insurance claims are sought against the authority. Depending on the situation claims can be numerous and/or of high value, thereby adding further pressure to the authority's budget.

#### **Risk Identification**

- 7 To efficiently manage the risk from highway trees in Surrey, specialist surveys are carried out to record and prioritise defects for follow up maintenance. Similar to other highway inspection cycles, routine surveys are completed on the Surrey Priority Networks (SPN) 1 & 2 on a three year cycle, and the SPN 3 network on a five year cycle. Data collected by the surveys is specific to identified defects rather than general condition and is held spatially on an asset management database. The survey is highly specialised and requires observation and detailed knowledge of the nature of trees to be able to appropriately identify the risk. It is worth noting that on occasion this assessment may be different to the non-expert perception of perceived risk. Risks identified through these surveys include dead

trees, deadwood, structural defects, disease defects and hazards caused by growth encroaching on to the highway.

- 8 In addition to specialist surveys, obvious defects and hazards are identified by the highway inspection team as part of their more frequent highway inspection routine. The highway inspectors will pick up safety hazards being caused by trees, for example tree root heave causing trip hazards on footways. The maintenance engineers and community highway officers will also progress tree maintenance issues in response to customer enquiries or known local issues.

<b>Maintenance activities</b>
-------------------------------

- 9 Throughout the year the contractor will carry out works to highway trees across the county, resolving or reducing the risk of the prioritised defects identified by the specialist survey. This may include removing tree limbs, complete removal of the tree or another form of intervention, depending on the nature of the defect. Work carried out on trees is aimed at being the minimum possible to resolve or reduce the risk and seeks to avoid unnecessarily altering of the street scene.
- 10 Similarly, identified safety hazards such as root heave trip hazards will be addressed as a response to the safety matrix. Where intervention levels are not triggered for a reactive response, engineers should consider further planned works to address these issues. Consideration in these circumstances would also need to include the possible impact to residents of the change to the street scene should removal of inappropriately positioned trees be the best long-term solution.
- 11 Growth of stems at the base of trees that could cause an obstruction to highway users also needs to be removed. This work is carried out as an annual programme and is referred to as epicormic growth removal.

### **Pollarding**

- 12 In some situations it is necessary to proactively manage the growth of highway trees and this is achieved by removing stems from growing trees in order to limit their growth in terms of size. This process is called pollarding. It is considered necessary to carry out pollarding on some trees in certain locations to prevent the growth of the tree causing problems such as subsidence to nearby properties or the highway.
- 13 Pollarding is a specialist form of maintenance applicable to approximately 1600 planted specimen trees across the county. It is recognised that pollarding plays an important part in managing the risk from trees and the authority is currently trying to address the backlog of trees that would benefit from this type of maintenance.

- 14 Pollarding is seasonal and takes place between October and April each year. Those trees that would fall into a pollarding programme do so over a maintenance cycle that can vary depending on the trees/location involved.
- 15 In previous years the county's pollarding programme has been limited, however in conjunction with the introduction of the new contract we have been able to increase the pollarding programme over the current financial year. Please see attached annexes for programme details.

### **Future Options for Consideration**

- 16 Future options for tree maintenance will be considered as progress is made in addressing the backlog under the current maintenance regimes. As part of this consideration it is envisaged that there maybe an opportunity to transfer routine/cyclical activities to other Districts & Boroughs at some point in the future. Any option would need to fully consider the ongoing liability issues around any transfer of maintenance.

### **Customer enquiry related highway tree maintenance**

- 17 Customer enquiries on tree or vegetation total approximately 6% of the enquiries the service receives per annum. These enquiries vary and will include requests to prune trees that may be blocking light, requests to remove 'perceived' dead trees and requests to plant new trees in verges. Similar to other highway enquiries the local office responds to customer enquiries and maintenance work is progressed with the contractor or advice provided as considered appropriate.
- 18 In terms of progressing tree work, priority is given to those enquiries that involve a dead, dying or diseased tree. However within the new tree maintenance contract there is scope to progress more work than these three categories allow, affording the authority the opportunity to respond positively to more customer enquiries than have been previously possible.

### **Conclusions:**

- 19 Managing the risk from highway trees continues to remain the priority in terms of maintenance. The introduction of the new contract has provided opportunities to increase the scope of the tree maintenance activities across Surrey. This should make a recognisable difference to the public and assist considerably in the management of risk.

### **Financial and value for money implications**

- 20 The County Council is liable for tree related insurance claims where recognised maintenance regimes are not in place.

**Equalities Implications**

- 21 A comprehensive Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken for the Surrey Highways maintenance contract as a whole. (30 November Cabinet paper (Item 16, Annex F)).

**Risk Management Implications**

- 22 Having an effective maintenance regime in place should reduce or remove the risk from highway trees.

**Implications for the Council's Priorities or Community Strategy/Local Area Agreement Targets**

- 23 None

**Recommendations:**

- (a) That the Select Committee consider and comment on the provision of tree maintenance as described.

**Next steps:**

To continue to develop and progress the cyclical and routine maintenance programmes.

-----  
Annexes:

- Annex A – Pollarding Totals by area
- Annex B – Breakdown by area

**Report contact:** Lucy Monie, Operations Group Manager, Highways.  
(Technical contact; Graham Banks, Arboriculture Team Leader)

**Contact details:** Lucy Monie 020 85419896, [lucy.monie@surreycc.gov.uk](mailto:lucy.monie@surreycc.gov.uk)  
(Graham Banks 020 85419216, [graham.banks@surreycc.gov.uk](mailto:graham.banks@surreycc.gov.uk))

**Sources/background papers:** n/a.